

On “Blessed Is The Fruit”

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In Robert Antoni's *Blessed is the Fruit*, we return once again to the mythical Caribbean island of Corpus Christi, site of Divina Trace, his award-winning first novel. This time, however, we follow the fortunes of two women - one black, one white - whose destinies intermingle in a run-down mansion worthy of Jean Rhys.

Lilla Grandsol lives on the D'Esperance Estate outside of St. Maggy, Corpus Christi, in the West Indies. The house (renamed Despair Estate by the locals, owing to its dilapidated condition) was passed to her by her French-Creole mother on her death. Alcoholic and broke, Lilla welcomes into her house twenty-three-year-old Velma Bootman, a black woman from across the island who will strive to keep the house, and Lilla together.

Vel is escaping problems of her own. Raped, abandoned, and "rescued" by a series of men, she has watched four of her children die, victims of the conditions plaguing the island poor: cholera, scorpions, and violence. The novel traces her development from awestruck girl contemplating the riches of white people to Lilla's companion and savior.

This temporally complex novel is told in the second person, and addressed to Vel's fetus, nicknamed Bolom. The book consists of two major parts, separated by a brief poetic section that records the voices of the two dreaming women. In the first part we learn Lilla's family history: her unfaithful father who was caught embezzling, her stoic mother, Lilla's girlhood experiences at a Catholic boarding school, her marriage to the cricket star Keith Woodward, but most of all the story of her love for her playmate, Dulcianne, whose paternal origin and relation to Vel mark one of the book's mysteries.

The second part, told in Vel's patois, chronicles her desperate poverty and victimhood at the hands of a series of unfaithful, drunken men. As Vel comes to knowledge of her own self and her place in Corpus Christi, the reader comes to understand the awful link that exists between three generations of Bootmans and the Grandsol family.

Both women are recognizable Brontean heroines--willful young girls whose movement through society depends on their attachment to men. What distinguishes this tale, however, is the artful way Antoni manages to represent the walls separating the characters from one another: race (Black/White/East Indian), religion (Protestant/Catholic/Obeah), and language (English/French-Creole/Yoruba). Indeed, in the largest sense, this novel is about what separates us, and what brings us together: the inescapable cultural, social, and sexual cominglings whose effects are only heightened on the narrow confines of an island.

This is a hard book to enter, as it begins with a recondite, interiorized narrative describing a horribly botched abortion attempt. The brutality of the act and the dislocatedness of the narrative voice make it hard to gain one's bearings. But once one passes into Lilla's narrative of her girlhood, the book takes off until we are once again brought up short by the arcane middle section.

The extent to which one enjoys this book—which says nothing about its literary merit, which is considerable—is the extent to which one looks forward to the last 200 pages, written in island dialect. We can, for example, recognize Joyce's merit without being terribly thrilled at the prospect of a month with *Finnegan's Wake*. However, it should also be noted that this work gives a voice to island individuals previously voiceless, characters who can only add to our understanding of the curious and accidental blends of religions, races, and cultures that comprise the Caribbean basin.